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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN BAPTISTS SEEKING MAINSTREAM RECOGNITION

11. (SBU) Summary. The Russian Union of Gospel Christian Baptists (RUGCB) focuses on interfaith cooperation and targeted outreach to Russian elite to overcome mainstream biases toward non-traditional religions. The main venue for their outreach is an annual National Prayer Breakfast, modeled on Washington's. Their hope for future membership growth based upon the unlikely conversion of ruling political leaders exemplifies the long odds non-traditional religions (i.e., not Russian Orthodox, Islam, Judaism or Buddhism) face in changing society's religious views. End Summary.

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Chipping Away at Religion's Tie to Identity, Politics  
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12. (SBU) PolOff met September 3 with the Head of Internal Issues for the RUGCB Vitaliy Vlasenko and President of the Russian Center for Church Multiplication Dr. Petr Sautov, who claimed that religious minorities in Russia have faced increased persecution since the late 1990s. Vlasenko said that Russians often equated non-traditional religious believers with non-Russians. He related personal experiences of how strangers had approached him and called him a foreign spy and enemy of the Russian government because of his minority faith. Nevertheless, Vlasenko expressed optimism that eventually all Russians would realize that Russian believers of non-traditional faith love Russia as much as anyone.

13. (SBU) Vlasenko and Sautov agreed that the government respects the right of minority religions to exist but places limits on their ability to grow, particularly outside Moscow. Vlasenko said that officials have obstructed the RUGCB's plans to acquire land to build additional churches, and that landlords, instructed by political figures, raised the rent on their meeting places in order to make them prohibitively expensive.

14. (SBU) Sautov was emphatic that what he termed "the Government's nationalist ideology and propaganda" influenced the limits placed on minority religions. He said that a level playing field would provide credibility to non-traditional religions, resulting in their growth. Politicians, Sautov claimed, have been unable to control the leaders of minority religions and have responded by limiting their growth. Vlasenko temporized that while it was unfortunate that ignorance and negative media portrayals have led to incorrect assumptions about his beliefs, President Medvedev may improve the situation.

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Hoping for Top Down Growth  
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15. (SBU) Vlasenko and Sautov are coordinating the 10th annual Russian National Prayer Breakfast, tentatively scheduled for March, 12010. They greatly appreciated Ambassador Beyrle's participation in the same event last year and have planned to invite a wide array of international representatives, including U.S. political, business, and religious leaders. The two men hoped that the Breakfast would be conducive to interaction among foreign and Russian leaders such that the latter would hear how other countries valued religious freedom. Sautov contended that access to Russian leaders at the Breakfast was critical to the RUGCB because religious freedom would

come to Russia only when a senior Russian leader became a member of a non-traditional religion.

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Comment:  
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¶6. (SBU) While Vlasenko and Sautov's ambitions for the Breakfast appear lofty, their desire to use the event as a forum to discuss the role of religion in democratic societies may genuinely broaden the discussion of religion and government in this spiritually conservative society. Their vision of on-the-spot, elite conversions, however, probably will remain elusive in a nation where administrative resources are routinely used to constrain minority church expansion and one's religion can help or hinder career aspirations.

BEYRLE